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COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

U.S. House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515-6035

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTH CONGRESS

July 20, 2004

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ROBERT S. RANGEL, STAFF DIRECTOR

Honorable Donald Rumsfeld
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Mr. Secretary:

In less than four months, American citizens across this nation and around the world will be exercising one of their most basic rights of freedom as members of a democracy—the right to vote.

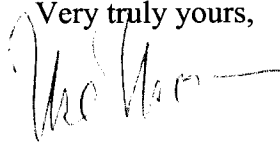
Our service members, particularly those who are serving overseas, who stand at the point of the spear protecting the freedoms and principles we stand for as Americans, deserve the opportunity to participate in the electoral process. The time available to ensure that those deployed around the world are able to participate in the electoral process is growing short. Service members and their voting age dependents stationed overseas only have until September to register to vote and request an absentee ballot.

I understand that the Department has an agreement with the United States Postal Service to ensure that ballots handled by the Military Postal Service Agency will be given priority and handled on an expedited basis. However, the transport of voting materials and ballots is just one step in the voting process for overseas voters.

My concern is that we hear from our troops in the field, particularly those deployed for Operation Iraqi Freedom, that they would like to participate in the electoral process but do not know how to do so. Many have indicated that they do not know who their voting assistance officers are and what they need to do to register and vote absentee. As you are well aware, nearly 40% of the forces in Iraq are reservists and National Guardsmen who may be more familiar with the in-person voting process back in their home states and need to be educated on the absentee process for overseas voters.

We need to ensure that all service members who would like to participate in the electoral process are able to do so. I urge you to take whatever steps are necessary now to ensure that our troops assigned overseas are provided the information and resources they need to be able to participate in the upcoming elections and to have their votes counted. I would appreciate learning what steps the Department is planning on taking to guarantee that our men and women in uniform are afforded the opportunity to vote in a timely fashion.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Ike Skelton", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

IKE SKELTON
Ranking Democrat